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W. J. Saunders.

Overloading of The High School Curriculum

E. W. HAGARTY, B.A.

THE OVERLOADING OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

AN ADDRESS

To the College and High School Department of the Ontario Educational Association, April 3rd, 1902.

BY E. W. HAGARTY, B.A.

1902.

THE OVERLOADING OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

BY E. W. HAGARTY, B.A., TORONTO.

MANY STANDPOINTS.

There are many standpoints from which this subject can be viewed. There is that of the University and the Education Department on the one side, and that of the High School on the other. There is that of the mathematical professor and that of the High School teacher of mathematics. Similarly of the classical professor and of the High School classical teacher. Likewise in Modern Languages and in Science. There is, too, the standpoint of the honest pupil at school and that of the intelligent and anxious parent at home. There is the standpoint of the examiner who annually groans over results. There is the standpoint of the medical adviser. Besides all these, and surely worthy of consideration, there is the standpoint of the *impartial, disinterested educator.* This latter, I take it, is the one which will be complacently and without argument on my part, adopted by the majority, if not all, of my hearers. No doubt we all claim to be ideal educators and to have an ideal standpoint. Let us make sure that we have this standpoint before we begin the consideration of the subject. I once had the temerity to enquire the opinion of a university professor on a certain point. The professor was a member of the senate and therefore, I suppose, one who had a good deal to do with the periodical attempts to balance and nicely adjust our High School curriculum. The point on which I sought his opinion was one of general educational interest, and one on which any educationist, especially one charged with the duty of assisting to frame a curriculum, ought *to have* and *to exercise* an opinion. The answer I received was a diplomatic intimation that the professor made a point of never (*never*, mark you, neither in private conversation nor at senate committee meetings, I presume) interfering in any question that did not concern his own department. I could enlarge upon this, but my remarks at present are merely introductory—on the subject of standpoints. The application is obvious. Now, are we going to bring this spirit of exclusive departmentalism into the present discussion? If so, our time will

be wasted. Surely it is not too much to expect that for one brief hour, no matter what our attitude in everyday practice may have been, we shall look at this important question from a common, disinterested standpoint. Let us cease to be Classical or Modern, Mathematical or Science, and for the while endeavor to be in spirit simple educators.

THE EVIL.

Having thus cleared the ground, let me proceed at once to the subject under discussion. For many years I have felt that in High School work we are *attempting too much and accomplishing too little.* With added years of experience this conviction has grown upon me, until now my observations have, during the last year, culminated in a very close sort of personal experience prompting me to make a move in the direction of bringing about a reform. For years I have felt the pinch of overwork in my own department. For years, in common with others, I have struggled for relief. All this time I have been trying to do two things, do the work of education and "pass" my pupils: two very irreconcilable things under present circumstances. In the latter, thanks to the wretchedly low standard, I think I have had a fair share of success. But in the former, I believe, I have been and am still a lamentable failure. I have watched successive "generations" of pupils struggling with an impossible task—that of mastering a reasonable portion of the work given them to do. I have watched them annually ground out of the examination mill as "passed" and known in my heart that they were not, even in the stage from which they had triumphantly emerged, educated. This year I have had the painful experience of watching a boy of my own crushed under the iron tyranny of an exacting curriculum. I knew what was coming when he reached the third year of his High School course, and dreaded it. The first two years of our course are preparatory, and we take our time to lay a foundation, doing it with fair thoroughness, except that, owing to the farcical Part I examination, many pupils have slipped through to the third year stage whom we, if left to decide our own standard of promotion, would have forced to apply themselves with greater zeal and intelligence to a reconsideration of the preparatory work. However, even for the average and more than average pupil the third year of our High School course has terrors of a disastrous kind. It is there that they begin to wilt, to lag, and to drop into a weary struggle for the paltry thirty-three per cent.

Charity begins at home, and to show that I have not come before you to-day without first endeavoring to set my own house in order, I ask permission to quote a few words with which I introduced a similar protest before the Classical Association last year.

Speaking of the excessive curriculum in Latin for pass matriculation, I said: "The mistake is being made of requiring our pupils to try to do too much, and of condoning their failure to do it even half well by 'letting them through' on a miserably low standard.

"It is the duty of the secondary school (1) to lay a solid foundation for what literary and scientific work the student may have to do in the University, and (2) to give all its pupils, irrespective of their University career, a training which, so far as it goes, is productive of power and conducive to a healthy, well-balanced mental atmosphere. Now, I ask, 'Is the teaching of Latin in our schools to-day fulfilling either of these requirements?' So far as the purposes of the University are concerned, the answer is forthcoming from University instructors themselves. One professor remarked to me the other day that he found his students not nearly so accurate in the rudiments as they were some fifteen years ago. Another complains that even our honor graduates in Classics make blunders in quantity which, a generation ago, would have earned for a juvenile offender a thrashing. Why, if our matriculants are being prepared as they ought, are these University 'Kindergarten' classes in Latin grammar taking up the time of instructors who are qualified and are paid to do more advanced work?" Later in the same paper I said: "I honestly believe our High School programme is overcrowded—not necessarily in the number of subjects, but in the amount of work attempted in each. Latin, I believe, has of late years been one of the worst offenders."

Now, with one more year's experience with the wider but painful experience I have referred to, namely, that of seeing my own boy sit down night after night with an amount of home work, not only in Latin but in other subjects, far in excess of even exceptional human ability to do with any degree of thoroughness, of seeing him poring over his books for from three to four hours, and then by sheer compulsion rising with the weary protest that he had not done nearly all, of seeing him go to school day after day with work only half prepared, always behind and with no hope of having time to review or catch up—I say, with this added and

painful experience, I now declare before this body of educators that what I said of Latin last year may to a very large extent be said of our curriculum as a whole.

Strange that my remarks of last year anent the dissatisfaction felt by University men with the present state of affairs, should find corroboration with regard to an entirely different department in the words of a University professor. Prof. Young, of Trinity University, in his admirable paper read at Ottawa last summer, entitled, "What a Pupil has a Right to Expect as a Result of his High School Training in French and German," says, speaking of the sin of working for examinations, "Not only is the aim of the teacher lowered, perhaps insensibly, and independence stifled in the pupil, but a great deal of hasty (therefore bad) teaching and inaccuracy is the result. On the latter point I feel strongly, for I have just finished reading three sets of *scholarship papers* (scholarship papers, mark you) for the Universities of Ontario, the examination being conducted by the Education Department. Hardly one of the candidates (about 120 in number) was able to give correctly common forms of verbs in general use occurring in the prescribed texts. . . . . The same kind of mistake was found also and more frequently in the answers to the German papers."

Now, this extract corroborates my statement that University men do not deem the results satisfactory, and that, too, outside of the Classical Department. Without much trouble I think I could find similar evidence with regard to Science and Mathematics. Prof. Young, however, while complaining of the evil of inaccuracy, finds fault with the teacher for working with the examination in view. Are we to have one kind of teaching in our schools and another kind of examination? What are examinations in our schools for if they are not to be worked for both by teacher and by pupil? What are curricula for, if they are not to be followed? Dare we ignore either examinations or curricula? Is it legal, to say nothing of the moral aspect of the question? Come and try teaching according to your ideal, professor, for one year, and then tell us. No, the fault Prof. Young complains of in High School work is just the fault I complain of, haste, bad teaching, inaccuracy. But it is not the fault of the teacher, it is the fault of a faulty curriculum and faulty examinations based on said curriculum.

No one appears to be satisfied. Teachers themselves as a class, I certainly believe, are not. University examiners evidently are not. Parents (I speak as one) are not. The medical profession are

loud in their protests against the injury being wrought the race by our elaborate system of cramming. Just the other day an eminent physician of the city, who in his time was one of the most successful teachers in this Province, told me that in his own practice this year he could point to three pupils who were rendered physical wrecks before Easter. He thinks our whole system is wrong, though, as an enthusiastic young "crammer" in his own day, he thought the patent, cut-and-dried method of stuffing the pupils was admirable.

I say the slip-shod inaccuracy of our teaching is due to an overloaded curriculum. Why, then, with so much dissatisfaction on all sides, among University professors, among teachers, among parents and among the medical profession, to say nothing of the groans and discouragement among pupils themselves, has this state of affairs been tolerated so long? Simply because we have been deceiving ourselves, deceiving our pupils, deceiving the public by the annual examination list, which never fails to loom up in grand proportions, thanks to the miserable 33 per cent. standard. We soothe our conscience and allay the disquiet of the public by "passing" pupils who have not been educated, but crammed. A medical student came to me last June to be crammed in Latin for July. He had the most meagre knowledge of Latin accidence, had read no Caesar or Virgil, but wanted to pass. I loathed the task, and at any rate was too busy. A friend took compassion on him. The student passed. Yea, verily, he passed, with just a month's cramming. And this is the way our University "Kindergarten" classes are filled up. No, worse than that, they tell me it is not necessary even to pass in order to get into the Kindergarten class at the University. That is it, they give us too much to do properly, put up a sham barrier, a low hurdle so to speak, and then steal our pupils from us by letting in at the back door those who cannot even jump the miserable barrier. "Is ours an educational system?" I ask.

I might say, that in order to obtain specific proof of the way in which home-work is pressing upon even good pupils, I recently gave out to some dozen reliable students of the pass matriculation class, blank forms to be filled in as a month's record of their home-work. A glance at these shows that the pressure is chiefly in the languages, that practically the whole evening is spent by pupils in attempting to get up translation without covering anything like the work assigned. As far as my observation goes, the work

prescribed in German translation is ridiculously (no, I will say painfully) large. It is about as absurd as the work in Latin. I do not think it is any breach of confidence to say that I know that lessons were assigned to beginners in German translation this year, which the teacher admitted would have taken her as a beginner two hours to study. What time is left, I would ask, for other memory subjects, such as History, English Literature, Euclid, Physics, Chemistry, to say nothing of the enormous amount of time taken in planning, composing, scribbling and re-writing the monthly essay in English Composition? The records I obtained show that the bulk of the time at home was spent on looking up long lists of words for translation, wrestling with about half or a third of the sense, and that such subjects as History, English Literature, Science were slighted. No home-work seems to have been expected in Mathematics, at least practically none was obtained. Now this may seem strange coming from a language man. But as a language man I protest against such a state of affairs, especially seeing that the results are so shabby even from a language standpoint. Practically the bulk of the pupil's time at home is spent on language "fagging" (I will not call it study), with such scrappy results as Mr. Young has portrayed.

THE CAUSE.

Now I have dwelt at some length on the evil. Let me point out briefly how, in my opinion, all this has been brought about. Why have we so inflated, so disproportioned a curriculum? I attribute it simply and entirely to the way in which our matriculation curriculum is made.

1. There is no common educational standpoint.
2. There is too much bickering among departments.
3. The views of High School teachers as to the capabilities of their schools, and as to educational effects and ideals, are not sufficiently studied and acted upon by our University authorities
4. The pass curriculum is framed too much with an eye to the requirements of the honor course in each department without reference to the general effect.

As to the lack of a common educational standpoint, the incident of the diplomatic professor who never ventured to express an opinion on any matter outside of his own department may be taken as an illustration. How can a committee which sits down to work with each of its members thinking solely of his own department,

frame a curriculum sufficiently well balanced, or kept within bounds, to have a good general educational effect? If each thinks exclusively of his own department, who is to think of education?

On the bickering between departments let me quote Professor Young again:—

"Classicist and Modern have fought in Ontario in the days gone by and I am not sure that the fight is over yet. Instead of so doing they ought to have been working together, as those whose cause is one for the advancement of the interests of education generally."

How can a curriculum be duly adjusted and curtailed when this kind of war is going on? Who is to decide between the warring elements? Obviously those who know least about the points in dispute—the outsiders, the representatives of other departments. Hence the rule, I suppose, as to non-interference adopted by our diplomatic professor. Two departments engage in deadly combat. The disinterested non-combatants who ought to be standing by to give the umpire's decision, quietly view the proceedings until, I suppose, the contestants, like the Kilkenny cats, succeed in effacing each other, or, what is worse, arrive at a compromise in which the cause of education is effaced in the mad struggle to see who will pile on the most work.

In the comparatively insignificant question whether Greek shall off-set one modern language or two, a great deal of powder is wasted by experts on both sides, and a snap vote is taken, influenced largely by the amount of pro-classical or anti-classical prejudice in the Senate. But, on the really important educational question, how much Latin, German or Chemistry can properly be studied for pass Matriculation, each department sits down as it were (that is when they are not standing up to fight), with its back to every other department and decides. Such a thing as a mutual summing up or balancing, with a view to a reasonable total amount, seems not to be thought of. If there is an occasional peeping over the shoulder to see what the other fellows are doing, it is not improbably with the object of watching for some moment of weakness of which advantage may be taken. To illustrate, I will quote a story as I received it from my esteemed and unimpeachable friend, the Secretary: "Some years ago, owing to the protests of Mr. Smyth and other Science teachers, the amount of Chemistry for pass matriculation was reduced. This was promptly followed by a corresponding increase in the amount of Latin translation imposed on the unfortunate student." And, I suppose, now a reduction in the

amount of Latin will probably be followed by a corresponding increase in something else. At least the fear of this I believe is the chief obstacle to a reduction in Latin.

On my third and fourth reasons for the faulty curriculum, the failure to study and act upon the views of High School teachers, and the tendency to base the pass curriculum on the needs of the honor courses, I shall not enlarge. The views of High School teachers are taken and sometimes sought. But this is not done systematically, and there is no systematic method followed for crystallizing such views and bringing them forcibly before the Senate. The pass course can be trusted to discover clever specialists for the honor departments, but it should be adapted to the educational requirements of the average student. Specializing should not begin till the honor course has been embarked upon. The question should be, not "What pass work in his department should an honor man know to begin with?" but "What amount in all the subjects can the average student in the pass stage assimilate to his own advantage?"

THE REMEDY.

Now I come to the remedy. If you are not satisfied with things as they are, if you agree with me that the evil of our system is *over-work and its invariable correlative, lack of thoroughness*, let us, as men and women of sense and consistency, stop and consider what is to be done about it. Surely we are not to content ourselves with complaining.

In theory, no doubt, the remedy has already suggested itself:

1. Let us drop our narrow departmentalism and adopt a common educational standpoint.

2. Let us advocate two things from this standpoint—a curtailment of the work attempted, and the raising of the standard of thoroughness by increasing the pass limit to 50 per cent. on suitable papers.

In practice, how is this to be attained? I suggest and hereby propose as follows:

1. That a permanent committee of eight be appointed by this College and High School Department, to be called "The Educational Committee."

2. That this committee be composed of two from each department, one University and one High School representative.

3. That this committee be instructed to watch all proceedings with reference to the Matriculation curriculum from a purely

educational standpoint, utilizing departmental knowledge and opinion only so far as is necessary to arrive at an intelligent decision on the broad issue of education.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I have taken up your time at greater length than I intended or wished. I have not sought to convince, but merely to rouse to action those whom I believe to have been already convinced. I am but a humble member of the teaching profession, a mere private in the ranks. No doubt a good deal that I have said may seem bold. Some may not agree with me. But, at any rate, I beg of you to go at least this far with me. Ask yourselves if you are satisfied. If not, what is the disturbing element? If you can make up your minds as to that, act, and act quickly. I now beg leave to move:

1. That the amount of work for pass matriculation be generally reduced.
2. That the standard be raised to 50 per cent.
3. That a committee of eight be established to supervise details.